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AUTHOR McEchron, W. David
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents thoughts and techniques concerning the control of the specific learning disability (SLD) child and the emotional needs which these children have. The SLD child whose learning and behavior problems are significant and are due to some visual-perceptual or organic problem and not emotional disturbance, disadvantagement, or gross sensory deficit probably accounts for no more than 3% of the school population. Changing the child's behavior is one way of improving the situation. This can be done by supplying the parents and the teacher with specific techniques for controlling behavior. The psychologist's role in this process is to get the parents and teacher to accept responsibility for developing and enforcing the structure agreed upon. The structure must be suited to the needs of the individual child involved. The psychologist's goal is to get the parents and teacher to a point where they can control the structure being imposed and have the flexibility and insight to anticipate behavior changes. (Author)

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EMOTIONAL NEEDS AND CONTROL OF SLD CHILDREN

by

W. David McEchron
School Psychologist

CG 007 538

Muscatine-Scott County School System
Alpine Centre South, Kimberly Road
Bettendorf, Iowa

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W. David McEchron

It's always difficult to begin a paper of this nature because of the problems encountered in definition. The SLD child, in this paper, is seen as being different from those children who are labeled "learning disabilities". SLD is meant to signify specific learning disability, and for a child to fall into this category he must be of average or above intelligence, exhibit some visual perceptual or organic problem, and must be significantly behind in his academic progress. Such a child's difficulty cannot be explained by the presence of emotional disturbance, cultural disadvantagement, gross sensory or organic handicaps, or behavioral disorders.

This type of child, who is in need of perhaps special classroom placement and certainly special attention from school personnel, probably accounts for no more than about 3% of the school population. This 3% is that portion of the specific learning disabilities children which requires special help and does not include those children who may have the same type of problems but to a lesser degree and; therefore, require less involvement of special personnel.

The purpose of this paper is to present thoughts and techniques concerning the control of SLD children and the emotional needs which these children have.

Relationships With Others:

There often seems to be a pronounced origin for the emotional difficulties of SLD children. Because an SLD child cannot be said to be primarily emotionally disturbed, it does not mean that he does not have some emotional needs and problems. Many of these problems are usually related to his family's difficulty in coping with him.

In the beginning, such children do not meet the expectations of their parents. They are difficult to control. They may be overly active, disorganized, and require

constant attention and disciplining. Initially the parents are resistant to these behaviors in the child and they attempt to cope with them, but they become fatigued and, eventually, emotionally exhausted as far as this child and his problems are concerned. At that point the parent gives up and forms a negative attitude toward the child.

In reaching this exhaustion point, the parents try everything but nothing seems to work. Eventually, the parents begin to resent the child because of the strain which the child puts on their own emotional stability and the strain that is put on the marital relationship because of the presence of such a child and the conflicting opinions between husband and wife about disciplining the child. The child senses this. It is at this point, where the child begins to sense that he is different from others and that he is a difficult person for others to relate to, that emotional problems may begin to compound the original specific learning disability problem.

The parents at this point are extremely frustrated. In the beginning, they tried to cope with the problem themselves, then they sought answers from others - usually within their family, and then later, outside of their family through community agencies. They usually have difficulty in getting other people - friends, relatives, and even professionals, to comprehend the complexity of the problem that they are facing; therefore, they don't get the answers that they are looking for, and they begin to believe that they have failed as parents. From this it is easy to see why many parents of SLD children develop guilt feelings.

Just as the SLD child experiences difficulty in relating to his parents, so he also experiences difficulty in relating to his siblings. If other children are present in the family, it often makes the problems encountered more extreme and involved. The other siblings in the family are more controlable, so they are consequently easier for the parents to accept. The parents have a more positive atti-

tude towards the child that can be controlled , and who not only can be controlled, but who can return affection. Because of the problems confronting him, the SLD child has difficulty in initiating and returning affection.

The SLD child senses this difference of involvement among the other members of the family and begins to feel inferior and alienated. He begins to feel inferior because of his inability to be successful in the family and alienated because of his parents' difficulty in relating to him in comparison to the ease that he sees in his parents' relating to the other children in the family.

Also, the SLD child will often have difficulty in relating to the other children in the family. He finds it difficult to get along with them, and they find it difficult to get along with him. It is not unusual at this point for sibling rivalry to develop and for the SLD child to begin to take out his frustrations on the other children in the family. By doing so, he begins to be seen as cruel and aggressive, and he is placed under a stronger regimen of pressure and discipline which increases his alienation from the other children and his parents. The presence of problems between parents and the SLD child also has some serious implications for the other children. Parents may develop difficulty with the other siblings, either because they ignore them or because they apply the increased discipline to the other siblings when it is not required.

Similar to the SLD child's difficulty in relating to his siblings is his difficulty in winning and keeping friends within his neighborhood. The other children have a difficult time in accepting him because he is different. They can't seem to trust him because he is so impulsive and unreliable. He violates the rules of individual as well as group play. This increases the SLD child's feelings of alienation and he begins to become cut off from others and withdraws into isolation or strikes out at society.

At this point the SLD child genuinely feels that he is not accepted by others -

even his own family. He feels he is rejected and not loved and; therefore, in his eyes, he is probably a bad person and probably unlovable. He finds it almost impossible to receive any type of affection or positive attention.

He has difficulty with cause and effect to begin with, and consequently he can't understand the expectancies placed on him by individuals and society. Affection, when it occurs, is usually strained or contrived. Negative attention comes easily to him and it is the old story of something being better than nothing as far as attention is concerned. He also begins to be rewarded for being isolated and unsocial because he doesn't receive adverse attention when he stays away from others. He begins to feel that there's really no reason for going to the effort of socializing. He gives up on socialization because it's not rewarding.

It is at this point that the child begins to consider himself a failure and, unfortunately, it is at this point that he is preparing to enter school

In school, the SLD child almost immediately experiences failure and frustration again, and because of this, his feelings of alienation are intensified. He has difficulty in relating to the students around him because of their obvious success in academics and his obvious failure. He also has the same difficulties in relating to them that he has had with his siblings and the children in his neighborhood.

He has difficulty in relating to his teacher because she finds him difficult to control and deal with effectively. She is the perpetrator of the punishing situations he experiences and; therefore, he fears her. She begins to consider him not a member of the class as are the other children.

The child's parents become more frustrated because they do love this child. They are concerned about his welfare and success. They see that he is not succeeding in school, and they are frustrated in an attempt to understand his failure. They see their child as failing in their future expectations, and they see this as a reflection on their abilities as parents. They usually put undue pressure on the

child or else displace the blame on themselves or the teacher.

Behavior And Needs:

I have talked about the SLD child and the developing problems that he's confronted with, but there's more to him than his hyperactivity and lack of organization, and the impact that such behavior has on those around him and on himself.

It would appear that the SLD child's general pattern of behavior is a combination of some type of organic involvement and his emotional needs. Just as he can't succeed in academics, so he also has a hard time mastering himself in his relations with others. These conditions; however, do not result in specific behaviors such as stealing, but they often precede such behaviors.

Specific behaviors, such as stealing, are learned and acquired. They are a reflection of the child's general potential, predispositions of behavior, and needs. If one behavior can be learned, another can also be learned and substituted for that behavior. This is important because the specific behaviors become another cause for rejection by others, and it is often these same specific behaviors which are most damaging to the child and the others around him.

These behaviors must be dealt with because they may not be outgrown, and the attitudes and feelings which accompany these behaviors, both on the part of the child and those around him, may also persist. It is granted that many of the organic aspects which many of these children have will eventually be outgrown, but the consequenses of behaviors and attitudes persisting must be anticipated.

Behavior Change:

Because parents have the greatest degree of responsibility and opportunity for change, it is quite easy for all people involved to blame the parents for the problems which may exist. Such blame is generally unwarranted, and in working with parents the parents should not be blamed, but they must be made to accept the responsibility which they have for initiating change and working for it. The parents

must understand their potential in solving problems of this nature and develop means for effectively exercizing their authority and influence. To do this parents need to provide a firm, consistent, and fair structure within the home and they must do it in a way that is adapted to the limitations of their specific child.

If parents will concentrate on teaching behaviors and responsibilities to children, they will begin to be preventive in their discipline and structure within the home and cease to be punitive and reactive, and thus develop a more positive relationship between parent and child.

A principle which parents should keep in mind is that they should not worry about the "why" involved in a behavior. Too often parents grill their child for an answer about why something has occured and, unfortunately, in most situations children cannot express why this infraction has occured. They have neither the verbal skills nor the maturity of self-insight to give such an explanation. To an SLD child, who is extremely impulsive to begin with and whose verbal skills are quite often limited, such an explanation is extremely difficult. To the parents, such situations are frustrating because they don't receive an adequate answer, and often the admission of guilt which they are after cannot be elicited.

Possibly one of the most important principles that parents must put into the structure within their home is that of acceptance of the child. This must be total acceptance of the child. They must be supportive and remain affectionate towards the child regardless of the difficulty that they may have in achieving change from that child.

Still another principle which the parents should attempt to incorporate is that they should show their feelings openly to children. They must be emotionally honest. Parents may want to temper the degree of these feelings at times because they are a learning model, but they should always show them and they must particularly keep in mind that they must be as demonstrative in expressing positive feelings as they are

in expressing negative feelings. One of the reasons that parents of SLD children should show their feelings openly is that an SLD child needs all of the contextual clues available to him in order to assess a situation. For this reason, it is usually helpful if the parents use gestures and outwardly show their emotions through facial expressions as well as the usual method of verbal expression.

In a similar vein, it is important that parents remember that they are models of behavior to their children. They must exhibit proper methods of handling emotional situations as well as exhibit proper methods of exhibiting accompanying emotions.

The structure which parents must provide their children should be imposed with definite and clear limits. The limits must be selected by the parents and reflect their views of important social behaviors. They should be explicit in the expectations that they make of their children within that structure. They should provide the when, how and what of the behaviors expected - when something is to occur, how the child is to go about accomplishing the task, and what the specific result should be.

Parents must deal with all behaviors. Ignoring is one method of dealing with behavior if it is used for an acceptable reason, and as long as it is not in reality a rationalization for the denial of the existance of that behavior.

In disciplining children parents should be as natural as possible in their reactions and selection of disciplining. They should treat the SLD child as other children, but just as other children receive individualized discipline, so the SLD child should receive individualized discipline which is dependent upon the nature of the infraction and the child involved.

There are times, perhaps more frequently with SLD children, when situations get so out of hand that all parties involved come to a point of confrontation which is extremely emotional. At this point it is probably best to use isolation to shut

off the behavior of the child. This prevents serious strain from developing in the relationship and usually stops the behavior, at least temporarily.

It is also important that parents give the child responsibility for his own behavior. When responsibility for behavior is delegated, the parent should show confidence in the child - confidence that the child can overcome his bad behavior, and that he can change this behavior to a more acceptable form.

When the child shows that he can do a specific task appropriately, he should be expected to perform that task appropriately from that point on with the understanding on the part of the parents that the child may not always be capable of doing so because of organic or emotional reasons. If this expectation is held, then the goal for the behavior of the child will remain clearly defined and mastery of that behavior will more quickly be achieved. Once mastery is demonstrated, then the expectations are more firmly stated and failure of performance in that behavior is no longer acceptable.

The parents can prevent a lot of the stress and trouble which they encounter in discipline if they will attempt to prevent certain behaviors. They can do this by anticipating what these behaviors are going to be, and they can best do this by knowing their specific child and SLD children in general. Parents should not remove temptation from the child, but they should teach the child how to handle that temptation when it is present. For example, if they will realize that the impulsive child is going to attempt certain actions, such as playing with the television set, then they can prevent strong emotional situations arising from the child's behavior with the television set by teaching the child in what way it is permissible for him to control the television set. If he is to have any control over the television, he should be told what control he can exert and in what manner. For example, if he wishes to change the channels, the parents have to decide if he can determine what channel he is to watch at specific times, who is actually going to turn the channel

selector, who will retain the final authority for decision, and at what times the child may exert his authority. He may be allowed to change channels on his own on Saturday morning. On Sunday evening, he may not be allowed to change the channel without the parents' permission. These things should be specifically pointed out to the child by the parent in advance of the situation.

Also, parents can often prevent blow-ups which may occur by giving the child attention when he starts to demonstrate a need for attention instead of putting the child off for lengthy periods, thus developing in the child a need which is very difficult to satiate. By giving the child attention when he first begins to exhibit a need for such attention, the parents can more easily satiate the need. They are more likely to prevent the type of situation which often occurs when the child progressively through the evening becomes more and more demanding of attention until the parent becomes irritated and the child is rejected and punished for being too demanding.

Sometimes it helps if the parents will provide attention on a somewhat consistent and regulated basis. They may even go to the extreme of scheduling this attention. For instance, having specific times in the evening when individual attention is given to the child - 15 minutes before dinner, 15 minutes before bath-time, or after the child has been put in bed and is tucked in. It is best to give this attention at a time where there is a natural shut-off for the child and for the parent. The frequency of this intense attention should be dependent upon the degree of the child's need.

Also, it is quite important to both the parent and the child that when affection is shown to the child, that physical contact be used when possible. Many parents have difficulty in exhibiting affection with their children, and just as the child may have difficulty relating to verbal discipline and punishment, so he may have difficulty relating to verbal affection. Contact affection can be given by almost

anyone. Sometimes they may need a little help in realizing some alternatives which can be used. Some fathers, for example, are rather rigid and constricted in showing affection, but they can put their hand on a child's shoulder; they can hold a child on their lap. This they may be able to handle - they may not be able to handle hugging and kissing the child, but they can handle some of the other forms of contact affection.

In the school, the same principles for behavior change and control should be used as those principles recommended for the home. Their implementation; however, may be somewhat different.

Structure should be used in the school as much as possible. It is recognized that the school is already a structured situation, but it is felt that a higher degree of structure is needed for the SLD child. The reasons for the use of this degree of structure are that the structure will: aid the child in focusing his attention, help to cut out distractions for him, aid in controlling his behavior, provide him with a certain degree of security and, if properly implemented, give the child a greater opportunity to achieve success.

Remedial help, of course, should also be given in the schools. It needs to be recognized that academics are linked very closely with social success and that specific remedial aids for academics can be utilized not only for the academic remediation, but also for social remediation.

For example, in a child who has difficulty with sequencing, a task might be used where the subject has to order cartoons into a proper sequence, such as the Picture Arrangement subtest of the WISC. This type of activity will also aid the child in developing social perception. Another example is where the subject might deal with a sequence and then determine the next number that should occur in that sequence; such as 2, 4, 6, - and the child supplies 8. This type of activity is good for helping the child to develop the skill of prediction, and in the social

realm a person must also learn to predict behaviors and outcomes.

Just as remedial help in academics should be given and may have some transfer to academics, so specific remedial help should also be given for behavior. The teacher can go to some extra effort and spend time with the subject on socialization and on behavior activities. Success in a behavioral learning situation, such as discussion of the acceptable ways of showing anger in certain situations, may aid the child in getting along with the teacher and show transfer in the child being more willing to attempt work assigned to him.

The school has the opportunity to help the child reflect upon himself and to begin to become aware of himself, his actions, and the consequences of those actions. He can do this by comparing himself to others. This, of course, should be done under some type of supervision where he can receive guidance on a consistent and highly frequent basis so that his perceptions can be analyzed and interpreted for him. This is something the classroom teacher can often be quite effective at if she receives adequate direction from a psychologist or counselor. For this reason, as well as many other reasons, it is felt that SLD children should be kept in a regular classroom if at all possible.

The teacher in the regular classroom should make every effort to provide guidance and support to the SLD child, and she must realize that she must devote much individual time to him. She must accept him as a person and be supportive to him.

Ideally, if special education needs to be provided, it can be provided through the use of a resource room or possibly short term placement for a month or so for behavior or academic change. If long term segregated placement must be initiated, it should be done with the idea in mind that the subject will be returned as soon as possible to the regular school curriculum.

In dealing with behavior change, medication and operant conditioning cannot, of course, be overlooked. It is felt that both of these techniques are quite valid,

useful, and necessary in many situations. Both methods work quite well with specific learning disabilities children, but their applications must be for a purpose.

At this point, discipline and structure need to be reviewed as seperate entities.

Effective discipline must coincide very closely with effective structure, and it is directly dependent upon the quality and degree of that structure. Effective discipline consists of precisely defined limits and expectations. These limits and expectations should be firmly held to. In those situations where the child rebels against the discipline imposed and the source of the discipline, isolation is recommended. Isolation often works in those situations where behavior needs to be shut off to prevent the relationship between parent and child from undergoing serious strain. It should also be used in those situations where the subject reaches the point where he is unable to discontinue a behavior on his own, and it is also effective in removing the subject from a potentially painful situation or in preserving a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

As mentioned before, no behavior should be excused without justification. All behavior must be dealt with in some fashion. Some behaviors may simply be accepted as beyond the child's control, some behaviors may not be allowed under any circumstances, and some behaviors may be ignored for a specific reason, but all behaviors must be dealt with. Those behaviors which are beyond the child's control must be accepted and the child should not receive punishment for those behaviors.

Effective discipline consists of a positive side as well as a negative side. The rewards used must be as positive as the punishments used are negative. Positive reinforcement should be used to shape behavior, to elicit behavior, and to extinquish behavior; and with this in mind, a child can be taught to handle situations which he will have to confront in the future if they are adequately anticipated by those responsible for him. Teaching the child to handle situations he may confront in the future is an active method of confronting behavior control. Removing temp-

tation from the child is an avoidance of that confrontation which may well be inevitable.

Effective structure must consist of real and clearly defined expectancies which can be understood by all people involved in the situation - whether it be the parent and the child or the teacher and the child. Structure must, of course, be quite consistent and just as structure is a part of discipline so discipline is a part of effective structure. Consequences, when establishd, should not be too remote in time because many SLD children have difficulty in comprehending time and related concepts. The consequences accompanying structure should be very personal in their application.

Accompanying effective structure should be healthy encouragement on the part of the authority imposing the structure for the child to perform within the limits established. Expectancies on when an event should occur, what that event is, and how that event should occur should be clearly pointed out. The child will also need help in organization within the structure. He will need to know when he must start, how he is to go about performing a task, and what result is expected of him. Consequences within the structure must also be consistent and as clearly defined as the expectancies.

School Psychologist's Role:

The school psychologist has a very important role in dealing with families of children who have SLD problems. The school psychologist should work very closely with the parents as well as the school. This will require frequent contact and follow-up.

The school psychologist should not be afraid to take over for the parent or the teacher in certain situations and show them how those situations should be handled. This may require demonstrating discipline within the home or the classroom by taking over for a period of time.

In working with the parents, the school psychologist should guide the parents in establishing effective home management. Ths school psychologist should provide considerable support to the parents so that they do not develop a sense of guilt and also so that they can continue to have the stamina to follow through on the recommendations which have been established and agreed upon.

The school psychologist will also need to educate the parents either personally or by guiding them to sources of education so that they can understand the needs of their child and understand the difficulties confronting them as parents. In the education of parents about specific learning disabilities, the psychologist needs to take an active and effective role in interpreting the information which the parents read and are exposed to. Because parents are not trained psychologists, they may read about one aspect of special education, such as specific learning disabilities, but they may not be sophisticated enough to adequately interpret all the information available to them.

In dealing with parents, the psychologist should give the parents as much structure to relate to as possible so that they may more easily incorporate and implement the recommendations made to them. As a part of this structure, the psychologist should give parents specific recommendations on techniques which will be effective with the child. He will need to continually reinforce parents on their effectiveness in utilizing these techniques.

One of the most important duties of the psychologist, with both teacher and parent, is to get both parties to accept responsibility for the care of the child. The teacher and parents must accept responsibility for education, behavior control, behavior change, emotionally educating the child, accepting the child, and socializing the child. A method of getting the teacher and the parent to accept the responsibilities which they must accept in this situation is by pointing out the consequences of action or the absence of action on their parts in both long and short

terms. For example, in a case of behavior control, both teacher and parent need to be aware of what the consequences can be if a behavior or attitude is allowed to persist.

As mentioned previously, a great part of the psychologist's role with both the teacher and the parent is to give support to them in implementing the changes which are agreed upon. This support will need to be continuously enforced and the success that the parents and the teacher achieve must also be pointed out to them because many times they are unaware of the positive change which they do bring about.

One of the goals of the school psychologist should be to get those authority figures involved, the teacher and the parent, to analyze their feelings and to effectively modify and control those feelings and to understand what impact they have on the SLD child. To do this, the school psychologist may need to assume a therapeutic role. Such a role may not need to be deeply involved and may be handled quite adequately through parent groups such as the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, but the school psychologist should be active in such groups and effectively contribute to them.

Summary:

Children with specific learning disabilities cannot be categorized and called "these kids" or "these children", even as I have been doing, because they do remain individuals; but the parents and teachers can be made to understand and anticipate the needs of the child in differing situations.

Some of the points discussed which are important because they are often ignored in dealing with an SLD child are: (1) The SLD child must be accepted as an individual - as a good person, and faith and confidence that he can achieve his potential must be shown. (2) All behaviors must be dealt with. No behavior should ever be allowed to exist because a party denies that it is present or that it is important. All behaviors can be dealt with in some fashion. (3) Structure is extremely

important both for the child and those people who relate to the child, such as the parents and the teacher; and structure, to be effective, must be consistent and clearly defined. (4) Expectancies are an extremely important part of effective structure and effective discipline, and expectancies need to be as clearly communicated as structure and consequences. (5) Bad behavior can be prevented by anticipating its occurance and teaching the child to control his behavior before a pattern of behavior is allowed to establish itself. (6) Parents of children with specific learning disabilities have definite needs. They are of extreme importance in the development of the child and must be worked with quite closely.

It is recognized that the points presented in this paper by no means constitute the total answer to the problems which arise in school and in the home with specific learning disabilities children, but it is sincerely hoped that these points may help stimulate thinking and perhaps provide some original ideas for meeting the needs of the SLD child.

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